

Family History Discovery Day
Saturday March 14, 2026

Writing Effective Family History A.I. Prompts

Joseph Tritchler, M.S.

URL: ancestrytracking.com

Email: ancestry.tracker@gmail.com





What do you want AI to do for you?

Artificial Intelligence is ...

a reasoning engine that can process language, analyze patterns, and generate historical and biographical narratives.

Artificial Intelligence is **NOT** ...

a search engine or automated record-finder.

The Artificial Intelligence Golden Rule

ALWAYS verify AI output using primary sources

Why?





What *can* AI do for you?

1. Summarize document contents
2. Extract, sort, organize and curate data
 - Pull information; present it in specific format (list, timeline, table)
 - Look for patterns: compare two documents for shared names, locations, etc.
3. Analyze photographs
4. Transcribe or translate
5. Create narratives
6. Teach you something
7. Brainstorm ideas
 - Create research plan/research locality guide
 - Family history activities/crafts/reunions



What AI can't do for you

1. Conduct original research
2. Deep record analysis
3. Create something totally new



The Genealogist AI Toolbox

1. Chatbots

- ChatGPT (OpenAI) (Nov 2022)
- Perplexity (Dec 2022)
- Copilot (Microsoft) (Feb 2023)
- Claude (Anthropic) (Mar 2023)
- Gemini (Google) (Mar 2023)
- Grok (X) (Nov 2023)

2. Image Creation/Editing

3. Image Transcription

4. Audio Transcription

Research Assistant



Image created by Google Gemini.



AI Prompting

It's a conversation

Initial Prompt 
AI Response 



Layered Prompt 
AI Response 



Continued until you
terminate the
conversation.



The R-G-C-T-F Prompting Format

Role

Goal

Context

Task

Flask





Chatbox: Gemini

◆ Hi Joseph

Where should we start?

Ask Gemini 3

Type your prompt.



Tools

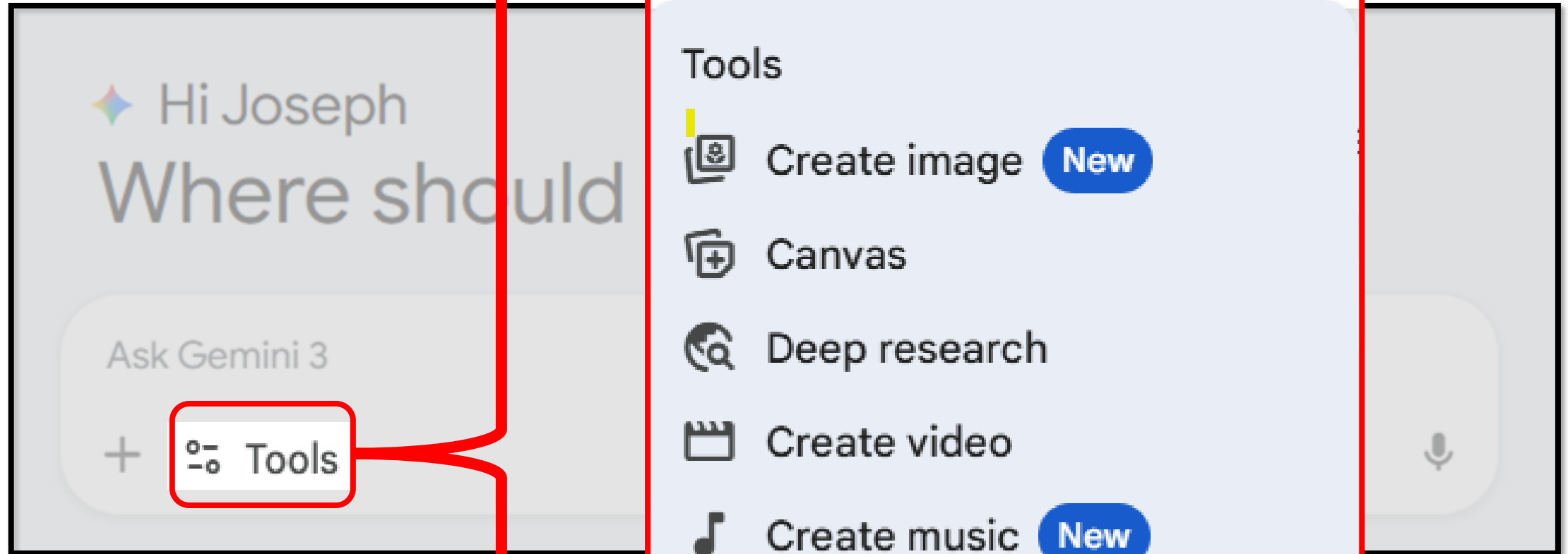
Fast ▾



Upload images or documents



Chatbox: Gemini



+ Tools

Tools

Tools

- Create image **New**
- Canvas
- Deep research
- Create video
- Create music **New**
- Guided learning

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State of Ohio
 Pike County
 Be it remembered that on this Day the last Will and Testament of Thomas Huff, late of Pike County died: was this day brought before the Court, and was proved by the oaths of William Haughton and William D. Callender the two subscribing Witnesses thereto, whose examinations was reduced to writing and reads as follows:

In the matter of the Will of Thomas Huff, late of Pike County deceased. This day personally in open Court William Haughton and William D. Callender who being duly sworn, depose and say that they were present during the last sickness of Thomas Huff, that they saw him offer his signature to the paper herewith exhibited, and heard him declare that the same was his last Will and Testament, that they signed the same as Witnesses on his premises, and at his request that he was of full age and of sound Mind at the Time, and free from all restraint or coercion.

Given to and subscribed in open Court on the 3^d day of the October Term 1841

William Haughton
 William D. Callender

And it appearing to the satisfaction of the Court that the said Thomas Huff at the time of executing said Will was of full age and of sound Mind and Memory and not under any restraint. It is ordered that said Will, and the Proof be reduced to writing to be recorded.

Which said Will reads as following to wit:

In the Name of God, Amen!

I Thomas Huff of Pike County Ohio, considering the uncertainty of this mortal life and being of sound Mind, blessed be almighty God for the same to make and publish this my last Will and Testament, in manner and Form following (that is to say) First, I give and bequeath unto Richard Huff and Thomas Huff my Sons the Sum of \$103.21 1/2 cts. I do also give and bequeath unto my Son Joseph Huff, Benjamin Huff, Caleb Huff, Isaac Huff the Sum of one Dollar each. I also give and bequeath to my Daughters Susan F. Moore and Abigail Callender all the remainder

Crop the images before uploading to Chatbot

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of my Estate. Which said several Legacies I have appointed Legates within six months after my decease. In Witness whereof I have hereunto set my Hand and Seal the 8th Day of January in the year of our Lord one thousand Eight hundred and forty one signed sealed and published and declared in the above name.

Thomas Huff to be his last Will and Testament in presence of us who have hereunto subscribed our names as Witnesses in the presence of the Testator.

William Haughton
 William D. Callender

Pike County, Ohio, Will Record, vol. 1, 1815-1876, pp. 111-112, Thomas Huff, 8 January 1841, proved 20 October 1841; image, FamilySearch (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3QSQ-G9QK-XDJQ> : accessed 10 February 2024), digital film 005865661, images 152-153.

Role

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You are a professional genealogist who specializes in 19th century probate document transcription and analysis. You have been asked to transcribe and summarize the will of Thomas Huff who died about 1841. Using the attached images, prepare a genealogist quality transcription of the document and then summarize the document focusing on dates and identifying every person named in the record and family relationship specifically identified in the document. Do not speculate about relationships that are not defined. Provide the summary in a four-column table: Name | Relationship | Key Detail | Evidence of relationship (exact quote from the document). If you hypothesize about a relationship, indicate the relationship as "Possible". Format as a markdown table.

Name	Relationship	Key Detail	Evidence of Relationship (Quote)
Thomas Huff (Sr.)	Testator	Deceased by Oct 1841; signed with a mark.	"I Thomas Huff... do make and publish this my last Will"
Richard Huff	Son	Co-inheritor of \$103.21½.	"unto Richard Huff... My Sons"
Thomas Huff (Jr.)	Son	Co-inheritor of \$103.21½.	"unto... Thomas Huff, My Sons"
Joseph Huff	Son	Inherited \$1.00.	"unto My Sons Joseph Huff..."
Benjamin Huff	Son	Inherited \$1.00.	"unto My Sons... Benjamin Huff"
Caleb Huff	Son	Inherited \$1.00.	"unto My Sons... Caleb Huff"
Isaac Huff	Son	Inherited \$1.00.	"unto My Sons... Isaac Huff"
Susan Kincaid	Daughter	Co-inheritor of the residuary estate.	"to my Daughters Susan Kincaid"
Abigail Callender	Daughter	Co-inheritor of the residuary estate.	"to my Daughters... Abigail Callender"
William Slaughter	Witness	Witnessed the "last sickness" and signing.	"...by the oaths of William Slaughter... Subscribing Witnesses"
William D. Callender	Witness	Witnessed the signing; likely a relative by marriage.	"...by the oaths of... William D. Callender... Subscribing Witnesses"
Haldan Hempstead	Court Clerk	Attested the swearing of witnesses.	"Haldan Hempstead Clerk"

Layered Prompt

How long did it take you to prepare this response once you received the prompt?

- ◆ It took me approximately **20 to 30 seconds** to process the images, perform the transcription, and format the analytical table for you.

Because I can "read" the entire document simultaneously rather than line-by-line like a human transcriber, I'm able to quickly identify the archaic shorthand (like the "p" with a flourish for "per" or "pre") and cross-reference names across both pages to ensure the summary table is accurate.



Image Analysis

You are a professional genealogist experienced at reading historical handwritten documents, tombstones, and old photographs.

Analyze this image and provide:

1. A complete transcription of all visible text
2. Description of the physical condition (damage, weathering, wear)
3. For any text that is partially illegible, provide your best reading with [brackets] around uncertain portions
4. Clearly separate what you can confidently read from what you are guessing
5. Note any symbols, decorative elements, or other non-text features.

Do NOT describe what "should" be there based on context. Only describe what is actually visible in the image.





AI Assisted Brick Wall Research

**Research Problem:
Joseph Doty (ca. 1812-1906)**

AI Assisted Research Planning

Role

You are a professional, expert level, genealogy researcher. Your goal is to identify the maiden surname of Joseph's first wife, Rachel, and the identify of the parents of Joseph Doty. According to his military record he was born about 1812 in Ontario County, New York but census records from 1850-1900 suggest his birth may have been between 1812-1818 in New York. He died in Lookout, Woods County, Oklahoma on 30 April 1906 and was buried Alva City, Oklahoma. He was married twice, first to a woman named Rachel who died in April 1850 in Eckford, Calhoun County, Michigan, leaving Joseph with 5 children. Joseph and Rachel were living in Monroe County, New York in 1840 and moved to Eckford, Calhoun County, Michigan about 1845. Joseph married his second wife, Eliza Coffey Mondy on 30 December 1852 in Edwardsburg, Cass County, Michigan. Joseph and Eliza Doty moved frequently over the next 50 years living in Jackson, Iowa in 1860, Madison, Iowa in 1870, Jackson Township, Osborne County, Kansas in 1880, Delhi, Kansas in 1885, and Fritzlen, Woods County, Oklahoma in 1900. He served in the union army during the civil war.

Got it. I'll approach this the way I would a real client case: laying out **what we know**, **what conflicts**, **what records matter most**, and then giving you the **most defensible conclusions** *and* what still needs proof. I'll be very clear about what is solid vs. circumstantial.



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AI Assisted Research Planning

Open AI ChatGPT - Joseph Doty Research Planning:
<https://chatgpt.com/c/698a2b3b-9df4-8332-9407-3e0815f2dcf3>

The "Golden Prompt" Rule

If AI gives you a bad result, look at your RGCTF components.

Usually, the Context is too thin, or the Task is too vague.

Refine the prompt and begin a **NEW CHAT**.

AI Assisted Research Planning

Revised Prompt

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AI Assisted Research Planning

Google Gemini - Joseph Doty Research Planning:
<https://gemini.google.com/app/97148b7d79a08791>



Define Locality Guide Categories

Background

- Quick Facts
 - › Creation of the locality
 - › Jurisdictional changes
- Online Research Guides
- Geography and Maps
- History
 - › Local History
 - › Major Events Timeline
- Migration Routes
- Law and Government
- Libraries and Archives
- Genealogical and Historical Societies

Records Collections

- General Collections
- Bible Records
- Cemetery Records
- Census Records and Substitutes
- Church Records
- Court Records
- Immigration and Naturalization
- Land Records
- Legislative Records
- Military Records
- Newspapers
- Probate Records and Wills
- Vital Records
- Tax Records

Role

AI Assisted Locality Research Guide

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+ Ask anything

You are an expert level, professional genealogist. Your goal is to create a genealogical research locality guide for Ontario County, New York for the time period covering 1790 to 1850. Use the two attached images to identify the categories of information to be included in the guide. The guide is to be divided into two major sections: Background and Records Collections. Provide the repository information for each record collection included, including the URL for the collection if it is online.



Goal

AI Assisted Locality Research Guide

Background

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Task

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Flask

AI Assisted Locality Research Guide

BACKGROUND

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AI Assisted Locality Research Guides

ChatGPT Ontario County, New York, Locality Research Guide:
<https://chatgpt.com/c/698a56ee-2b9c-8326-a386-96e2505178b3>



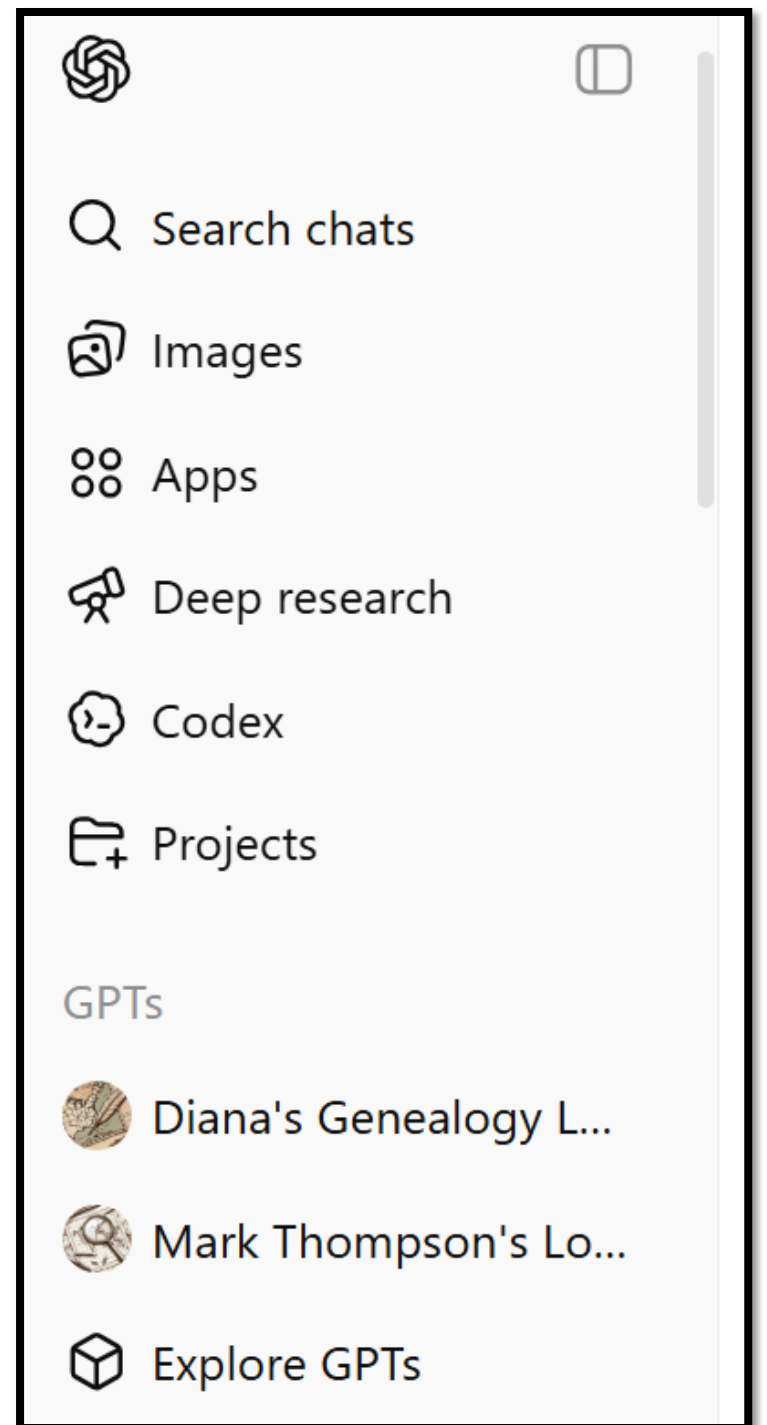
Creating/Using Custom GPTs

Diana Elder's "Locality Guide Builder"

<https://chatgpt.com/g/g-Y7oqvFVmP-diana-s-genealogy-locality-guide-builder>

Mark Thompson's "Locality Guide for Genealogical Research"

<https://chatgpt.com/g/g-TpLAlvCzD-mark-thompson-s-locality-guide-research-assistant>





“Hallucinations” guardrails

1. Ground AI with Constraints
2. Structure AI Reasoning
3. Require AI Verification (Fact-Checking)



Grounding AI with Constraints

1. Assign a role

Act as a professional genealogist -or- Act as a genealogy research assistant

2. Provide explicit instructions

Only use the provided text to answer

Do not speculate -or- Label speculative ideas clearly as hypotheses

3. Provide an “escape hatch”

If the answer is not in the document, say you do not know -or- I am uncertain -or- I don't have that information



Structure AI Reasoning

1. Chain-of-Thought (CoT)

Think step-by-step to reach a conclusion and formulate a response

2. Step-Back Prompting

First identify high-level principles (or broader context) before answering

3. Few-Shot Prompting

Provide 2-3 examples of the exact input and correct output format you expect.

4. Constrain Output Format

Use templates or specific word counts to limit AI “creative” drift



Require AI Verification and Iteration

- 1. Chain-of-Verification (CoVe)**
Formulate an answer, then create verification questions to check your own work for accuracy before responding.
- 2. Confidence Score**
Rate your confidence on a scale of 0-10 for each claim/idea presented in your response
- 3. Specify use of reliable sources**
Only use reliable sources. Provide detailed citations for each source used following “*The Chicago Manual of Style*” or Elizabeth Shown Mills “*Evidence Explained*” first reference note format. Include a website URL for all online sources used to create your response.
- 4. Self-Correction**
After the initial response, follow-up with Review your previous answer for any factual errors or inconsistencies



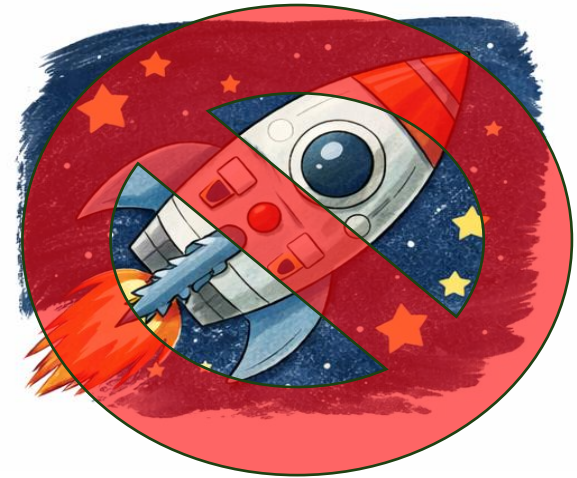
Remember . . .

Every Chatbot conversation needs to include R-G-C-T-F:

1. Role
2. Goal
3. Context (text)
4. Task (action)
5. Flask (format)

And don't forget to add
Hallucination Guardrails

It's not rocket
science



It just takes
PRACTICE!

